THE WESTBURY TIMES **SPORTS**

The Harvard of Horse Sense

Their Trainers Make Them Runners, Bob Duncan Turns Thoroughbreds Into Racers

By Daniel J. McCue

A dozen horses stood between Bob Duncan, his crew of three, and their first taste of breakfast. Already the early morning sun had begun to flake the sandy loam thoroughbreds run upon at Belmont Park in Elmont.

Beneath the barest dapple of cloud cover, their shirts already starting to show a day's worth of sweat, Duncan, his son Dave, and his assistants, Mike McMullen and Francisque Delpino, were trying to coax a recalcitrant filly through a practice starting gate at the track, her first leg in a likely decade's worth of racing.

"C'mon girl," Duncan said, his tone a mixture of calm and insistance. "Get in there."

With a lurch — and a last persuasive push — the two-year-old filly, perhaps a month shy of her first race, entered the gate and then, ever so slowly, is walked back out of the gate again before being ridden away, onto the largest of Belmont's two practice tracks.

For the next half-hour on this Friday, each of the horses gathered before Duncan undergoes a variation of the same ritual. Some, like the filly, literally have to be pushed into the starting gate. Others are more or less eased into place, McMullen and Delpino alternately leading a racing future into the gate, and pausing to pet and pamper it with comforting words.

Eventually finding himself with a few spare moments on his hands — the combined action of the sun and the exercising horse's hooves on the sand making it necessary for an irrigation crew to hold up the workout and add water to the earthen track — Duncan, blond and sunburned, strolled across the sandy estuary that juts out from one of its turns.

"Mind if I eat while we talk?" he asked as he unwrapped a bagel from a local deli.

Widely acknowledged as one of the best at his game, lifelong Elmont resident Bob Duncan is the St. Peter of Belmont Park. Like the hallowed keeper of the "Pearly Gates," Duncan keeps a record of each and every hopeful that comes his way. Without his approval — in racing parlance being "okayed from the gate" — a thoroughbred's career at the track could be over before it even starts.

"When horses come to be schooled at the gate, we're essentially looking at three different areas," Duncan explained of the process. "First, we're looking at how the horse acts as he or she approaches and is loaded into the gate. Then, we look at how he or she acts in the gate. And finally, we look at how they break from the gate.

"A failure in any one of these three areas," Duncan continued, "will keep them from racing."

While in Europe it is considered the norm for the horse's trainer to school them in the gate, in America a horse is trained and cared for by one handler, and schooled in breaking from the gate by somebody like Duncan, who's held his job at Belmont for the past 28 years.

In addition to teaching thoroughbreds how to cope with the rigors of the gate — "racing can be a traumatic experience for horses," Duncan admits — the Elmont resident also serves as the official starter for all of Belmont's races, nine on Wednesdays through Fridays; 10 each on Saturday and Sunday.

"Easy there, big fella," Duncan said after the horses returned and a large brown colt showed some hesitancy at the gate. Carefully coming up behind the animal, Duncan held both arms out at his side and began snapping his fingers.

After some deliberation, and continued cajoling, the large horse moved through the gate and ambled away.

"A lot of what we do here is body language," Duncan said later, explaining why he was snapping his fingers behind this particular horse. "If you make what can be interpreted as an aggresive move towards them, horses will tend to move away from you and, as in this case, move into the gate."

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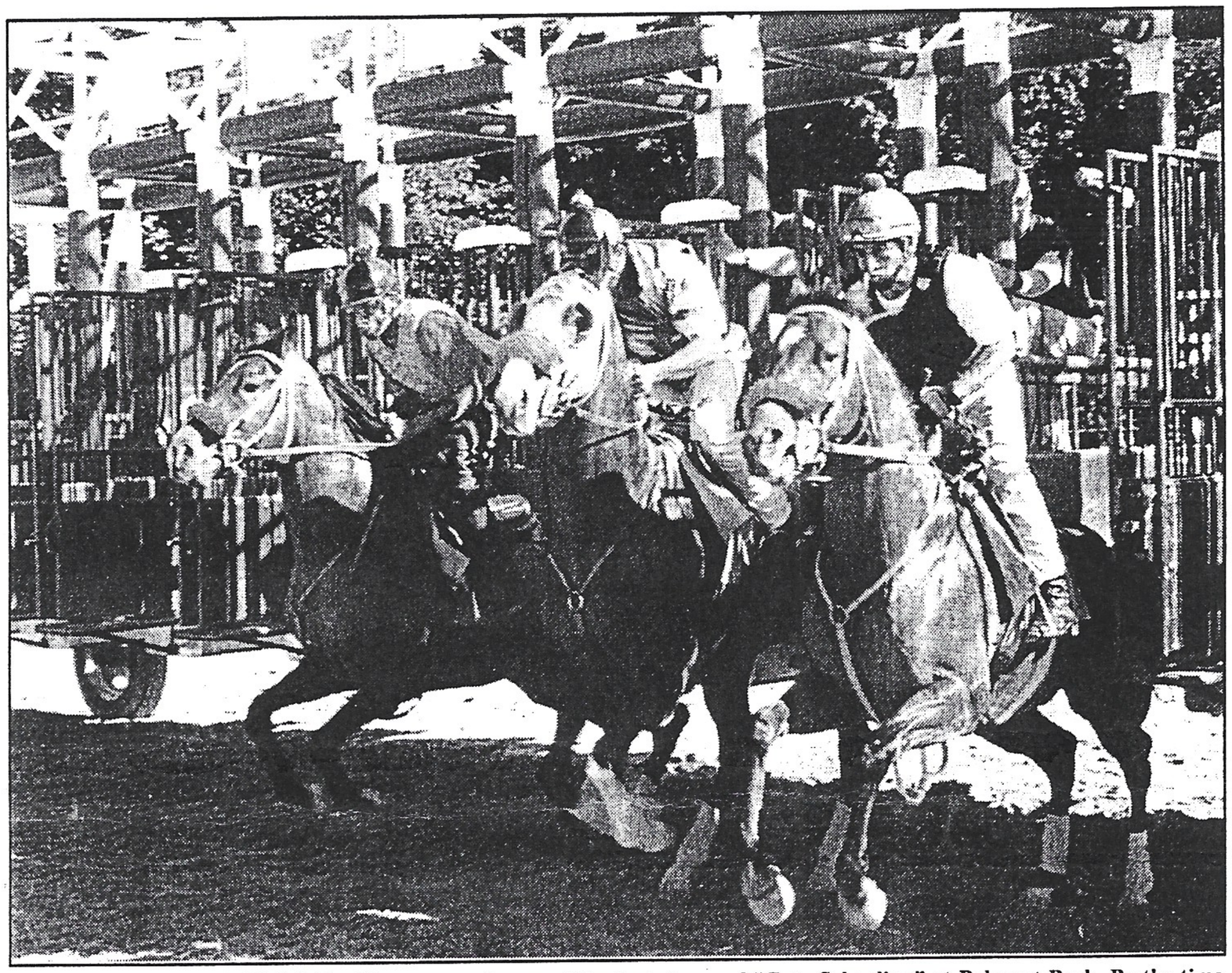
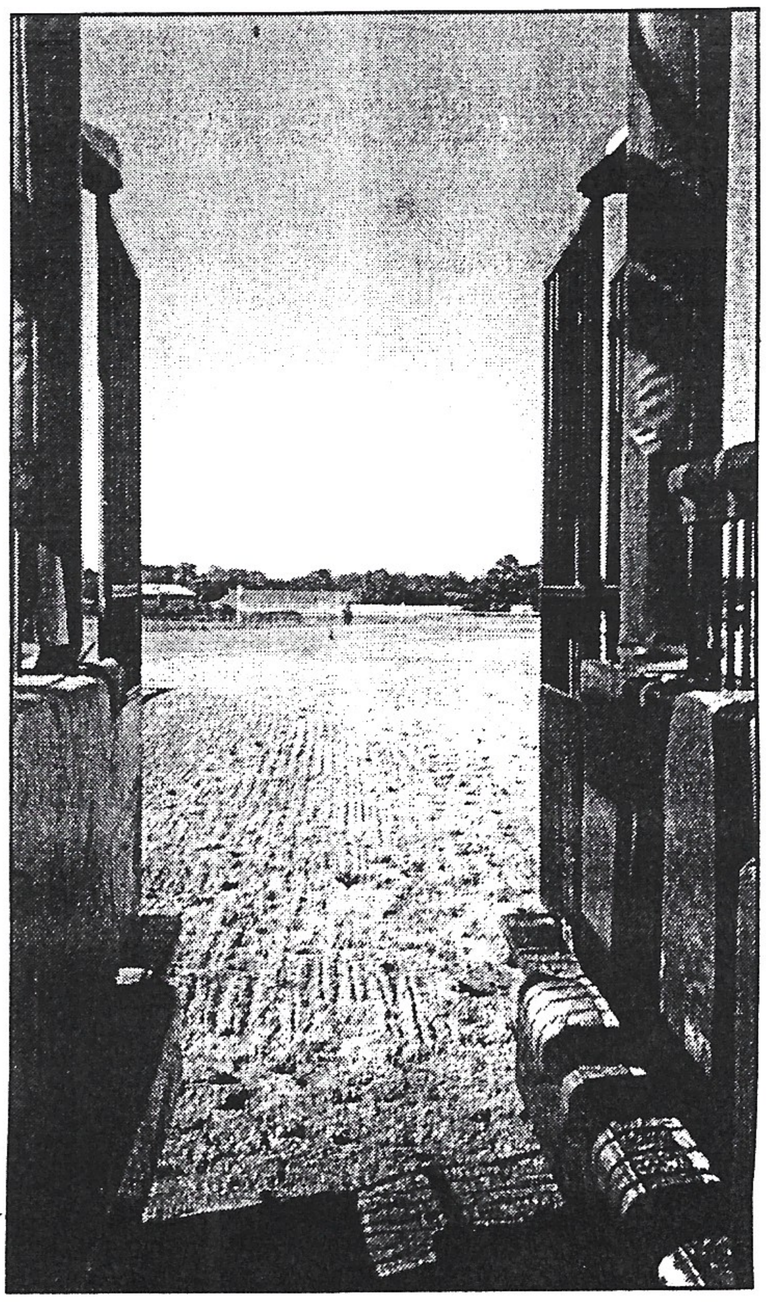


BREAKING FROM THE GATE with company is one of the last stages of "Gate Schooling" at Belmont Park. By the time this article appears, a week after this photograph was taken, it's likely that these thoroughbreds would have appeared in their first races.

Photos by Daniel J. McCue

BELMONT PARK'S BOB DUNCAN, who grew up and still resides in Elmont, is widely acknowledged as being among the best of his profession.



WHAT THE HORSE sees as he enters the starting gate.

The Harvard of Horse Sense

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Though he's seen no difference, in all his years at the track, in how quickly males and females adapt to the gate — on average it takes about 10 sessions before a horse is thoroughly acclimated — Duncan said gender does play something of a role in how schooling is approached.

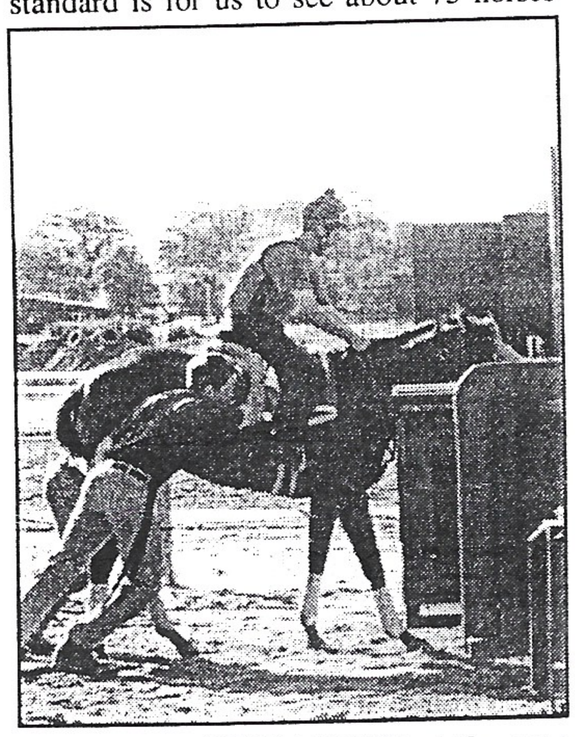
"Fillies tend to be a more hands-on experience," he said. "There's a bit more coddling, and they seem to appreciate the contact. Colts, on the other hand, tend to be more nippy. You have to try and ignore their playfulness, and they don't like you to be up around their heads.

"Of course, this is all generalities. In the end, each horse has to be dealt with in a very specific manner due to their individual personalities and experience."

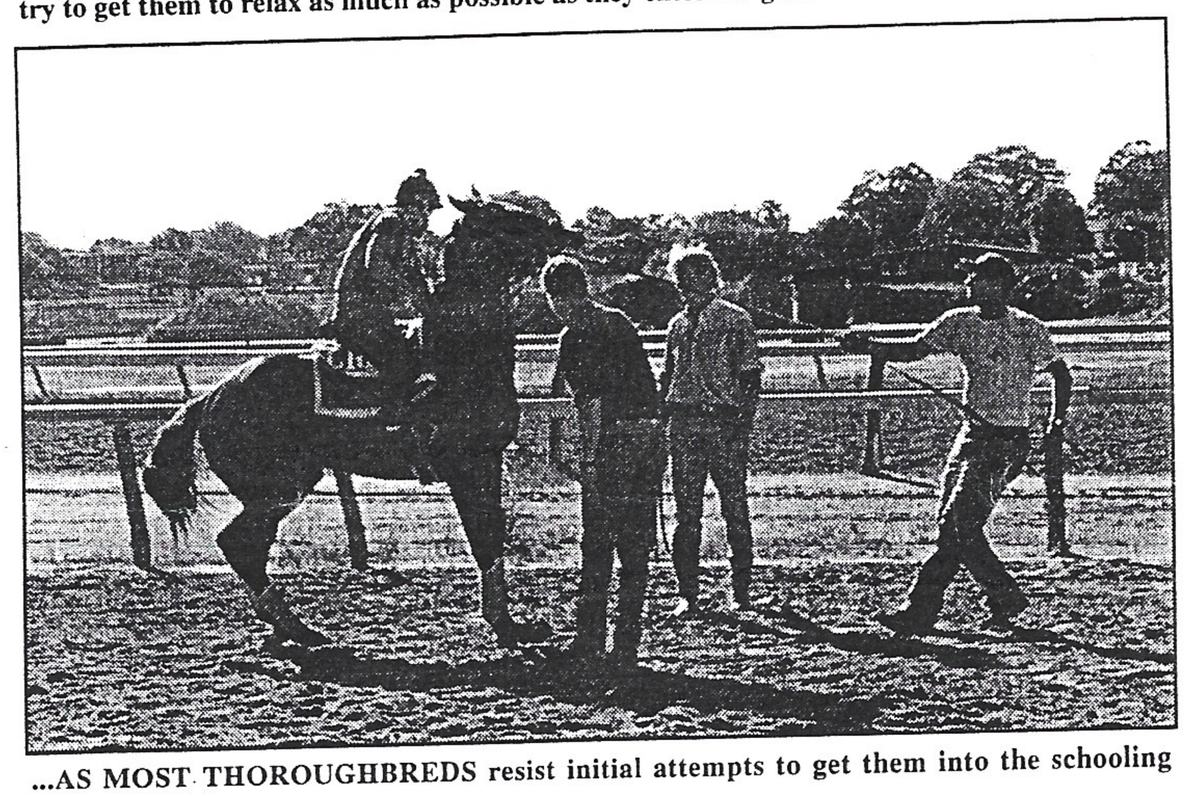
"Gate schooling," as the process Duncan conducts is called, is held from 7 to 9 a.m. every race day. On the typical morning, the teacher and his first assistant, Richard Brosseau, each see between 30 and 40 horses at two different starting gates.

"Last Wednesday was particularly busy, unusually so, with about 140 horses coming to the gates," Duncan said. "Far more standard is for us to see about 75 horses between us on a given morning."

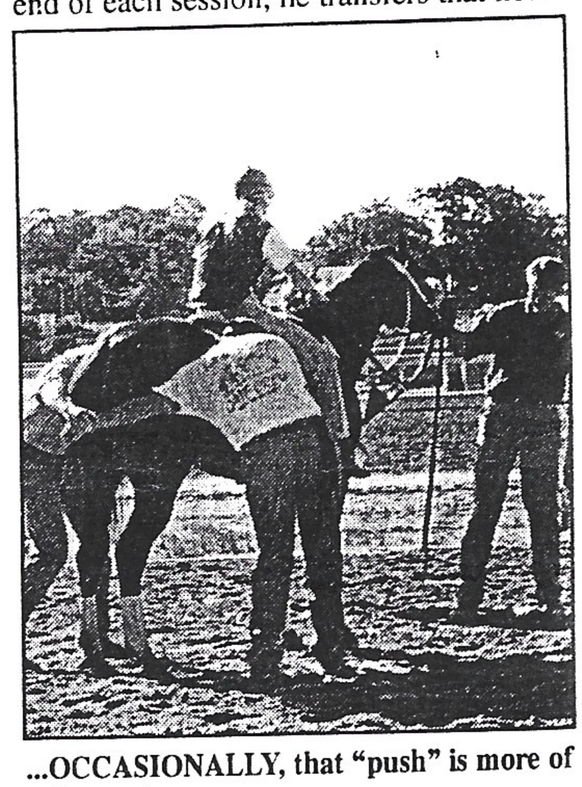
THE MOST IMPORTANT THING, as is the case with this filly, is to sooth the animal and try to get them to relax as much as possible as they enter the gate.



"GENTLE PERSUASION" at the gate sometimes means having to give a "student" a little push...



...AS MOST THOROUGHBREDS resist initial attempts to get them into the schooling gate....



...OCCASIONALLY, that "push" is more of a firemen's carry.

About half the horses come to Duncan with some gate schooling experience, either having been introduced to it at a training facility or at the farm where they've been reared. A significant percentage of the horses Duncan sees on any given day are also those undergoing some kind of rehabilitation, either from an injury suffered while racing or actually incurred while in a gate.

"Injuries are pretty common," Duncan said of the latter group. "And that goes for the humans involved too. In addition to the crew I have here and the crew that works with Richard in the morning, I have 13 regular assistants who work only the starting gate for races, and let me tell you, there is a high rate of injuries on the job."

What kind of injuries?

"There are a lot of back injuries, fellows get kicked by horses and that kind of thing," Duncan continued. "After all, we're talking about a pretty confined area that we're working in. It's only 28 inches wide and we're placing a 1,000 pound horse in there and they bounce around pretty good. It's a real contact sport for everyone involved."

Before being brought to the schooling gate, Duncan consults with the horse's trainer and exercise rider, ascertaining the level of experience and general demeanor.

"With that, really, the horse is put in our hands," Duncan said. "We'll start by just walking the horse through the gate and then each time they come back, we'll ask a little more of them until they know what to do when the gate swings open.

"It takes a little while to get them to know they're supposed to react when the gate opens, and then, once they understand that, we try to team them with a horse or horses of similar skill to practice breaking from the gate with competition."

As Duncan spoke, McMullen and Delpina were having a hard time with a particularly wary young colt. After a few moments, the horse locking its front legs in a rigid position of resistance, Duncan and McMullen gather behind the animal and grasp it in a kind of firemen's carry. The closer they get to the gate, the more that carry becomes a full-throttled push. After several minutes of tfiis, the thoroughbred finally relents and spends a quiet few moments in the confines of the gate.

"To the ones that have never been here before, the gate is a mighty strange looking apparatus," Duncan said, giving the colt a happy pat on the hind quarters. "Some, as we've talked about, have had a traumatic experience and are in need of having their confidence restored, and still others are just trying to avoid work."

Lazy race horses?

"Not necessarily lazy," Duncan said. "The thing is, sometimes horses will suffer a chronic injury during their career and it will hurt to run, or they might get hurt in the gate at the start of a race, and though their trainer will identify the problem and correct it, the horse will still think about that injury and still believe they have it.

"That's another reason you'll see us backing a horse ever-so-gingerly out of the gate. We want them to know that not every visit to the starting gate is going to involve physical exertion, and that nothing traumatic is going to happen to them every time the door slams open."

For every horse that comes to gate school in the morning, Duncan makes an entry into a plain spiral notebook. At the end of each session, he transfers that notation into a large, master book.

"Ten visits is the low average of 'graduates,' but some horses need 15 or 20 visits before they get 'okayed for the gate.'" Duncan said as he made another entry into his log. "And we had one filly that took a week just to get the 100 yards or so from the track to the gate school, so the amount of time it takes to go from a horse in training to a horse in competition really varies.

"Of course, that puts the horse's full-time trainer in a hard place because, quite naturally, owners start pressuring them, asking when they'll start getting a return on their investment.

"The bottom line though is, we're all working for the same thing We want exactly what the trainer wants, what the jockey wants, and what the bettor wants. We want to produce the best results possible."

Though he runs gate schools year round, relocating to Aqueduct when Belmont's fall race schedule is done, Duncan said the summertime really is the best of times for his particular brand of training.

"In the winter I think the quality of the horses we see declines a bit. I think they're a bit more fractious, the surface is a bit more 'cuppy' or slippery, and they don't spend much time out of the stable, so they're quite a bit less relaxed.

"The thing is, no matter what time of year, I still love what I do. I love the horses. I love to touch them. I just love to handle them and feel I'm teaching them something vital to their careers," Duncan said.

AFTER SUCCESSFULLY GETTING A HORSE into the gate, the exercise rider and Dave Duncan, Bob's son, give this colt some additional tender encouragement. Bob Duncan, meanwhile, makes note of the thoroughbred's progress.